Experiencing AHEA 2016

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Abstract

As a first-time attendee at an Adult Higher Education Alliance Conference, the author describes the experience and how attendance at the 40th Annual Conference further informed his role as an adult mentor and educator. To set the stage, the author describes his unique path to higher education and its influence on his approach to adult learning. The article continues with a discussion of topics ranging from customer service versus student success, obstacles in the adult learners pathway, acculturation, and degree completion to mentorship.

Keywords: adult learner, success, retention, persistence, acculturation

First of all, please allow me to express my gratitude to the leadership of the Adult Higher Education Alliance [AHEA] for the opportunity to attend the 40th Annual Conference as the recipient of the Larry Murphy Scholarship. As a professional serving adult learners, it is my commitment to remain a lifelong learner to stay engaged and relevant in my chosen field. The conference experience offered the exploration of multicultural perspectives, presented varying methodologies of achieving student success, and placed mentorship squarely at the forefront of adult learning.

Much like the students enrolled in the online degree completion program at Arkansas Tech University, my path in academia has been anything but typical. However, each stop during my journey continues to inform my approach to the adult population in higher education. These four professions define the lens through which I experienced AHEA 2016. During what I consider my first career, I developed individual program plans in a residential setting for adults with developmental disabilities. Next, I delivered leadership and soft skills training to business and industry. For my third career, I served over 16 years as a part of the United States Army Training and Doctrine

Command [TRADOC]. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan progressed, the number of soldiers with combat experience in my classroom increased with each iteration. As with Paulo Freire, the Army's historical banking model of education no longer sufficed. I adapted my instructional methodology to extract the experience in each soldier. Now in my fourth career, I serve students seeking degree-completion in the virtual environment.

My personal AHEA 2016 presentation examined the demographic diversity and student characteristics enrolled in Arkansas Tech University's degree completion program. I also examined current and future constraints in Arkansas' higher education landscape: flat funding at the state level for the fourth straight year, a belief in the state legislature that administrative bloat increases tuition costs, and inequitable funding for Arkansas Tech University through the state funding formula. What I sought, and received, at AHEA 2016 were proven concepts for increasing persistence, completion and rates of retention.

In her opening keynote address, Elice Rogers (2016) posed two questions which set the stage for the conference: Where are we now and where do we go from here? The political, economic, and sociological landscape for adult learners has changed and will continue to do so. Institutions of higher learning are under increasing pressure to serve students as customers and adult students as a market. Dr. Rogers described in detail the highly volatile season in which we are operating and the ongoing challenge of satisfying many stakeholders in a market-drive society.

As leaders in higher education, we struggle to balance the desire for higher enrollment with successful outcomes for the adult learner. A fine line exists between customer service and student success with regards to retention. Extending enrollment opportunities for students after a term begins may be an excellent idea from a client service perspective. However, each institution and degree program must evaluate the student success and persistence rates for those who enroll after the term initiates and compare the outcomes of the students to those who enrolled before the start of the term.

Obstacles for persistence and degree completion for adults exist in the external environment (e.g., finances and life events), the internal campus environment (e.g., faculty support, academic advising), and student characteristics (e.g., marital status, parental education) upon entry to the Academy (Berman, Rose, & Shuck, 2015). Program attrition is going to happen, but minimizing the rate at which it occurs is possible. A responsibility exists to enhance the assessment of potential students before initiating the intake process. Intake assessment potentially reduces institutional time and resources by decreasing the number of students exiting early in the program of study. Ethically, should institutions be taking someone's money if we do not know if he or she has what it takes to succeed?

In her presentation entitled *A new look at self-efficacy, adult participation, and success*, Debra Fenty (Fenty, Simpson, & Rogers, 2016) described the emergence of self-efficacy as a factor linked to academic success and persistence. In his study examining self-efficacy and academic success in first-generation community college students, John Majer (2009) described self-efficacy as "a cognitive resource that involves an individual's confidence or belief in one's ability to effectively engage in behaviors towards desired goals" (p. 243). Prior research found self-efficacy to be a critical cognitive resource among first-generation immigrant students attending a community college (Robbins et al., 2004).

The deployment of enhanced intake assessment protocols for adult learners would not only allow the identification of a student's level of self-efficacy but also to minimize the barriers influenced by a first-in-family or Returning-after-Hiatus student who may not be familiar with the concepts, jargon, and processes of higher education. While the example may appear extreme, each term I confront this question from at least one new student: "What is an elective?" While it may not be feasible to decrease or change the risk factors to persistence presented by adult learners, identifying the factors with an active relationship to academic success that may be addressed before enrollment is the first step to risk mitigation.

Acculturation, or knowing the things you need to know, into higher education is not an easy process for traditional or non-traditional learners. The language of higher education is unfamiliar to most outside of the academy and processes (financial aid, registration, learning management systems, and so on) vary considerably from institution to institution. The lack of acculturation may compound fluctuations in the student lifecycle, which is not the linear progression many envision. Students enter higher education and leave, many of whom enroll again at a later date. The student lifecycle significantly increases the number of touch point opportunities an institution may have with any one student. A touch point is any interaction allowing discovery of what it is the student needs to persist and succeed.

In her session, *Success Notes: Student success and the adult learner*, Antonia Sheel (2016) conveyed the five components of the Title III Strengthening Institutions grant received by the University of New Rochelle, which was developed to raise the college's retention, persistence, and graduation rates. The five components are the establishment of student success communities, college-wide data management to monitor student progress, a library learning commons to offer developmental learning modules, faculty professional development, and the expansion of STEM-related coursework. As the Director of Student Success, Sheel considers herself as the chief student advocate and liaison to the institution's Student Services division. Perhaps more importantly, she recognizes her team members as cultural brokers between the student and the college experience. By acknowledging student touch points across the institutional experience, barriers to persistence and success may be identified, interventions implemented, and the efficacy of the interventions measured.

From a programmatic perspective, Nancy Rabidoux and Pam Jackson's (2016) description of the Finish What You Started program at the University of Rhode Island [URI] resonated with me due to its similarity with my department's degree completion program at Arkansas Tech University. The Finish What You Started program is a perfect example of identifying and meeting a need based on student preferences. While our courses are delivered online and asynchronously to a diverse, rural population in

Arkansas, the URI program achieves its goals with weekend and evening class delivery. Interestingly, the average number of days from inquiry to enrollment at URI is over 400 days. On the surface, the length of time to enrollment may appear lengthy, but what it reflects is the institution's commitment to remain in contact with prospective students until he or she is in a position to enroll, persist and succeed.

Two sessions during the conference asked me to re-evaluate my perspectives. First, Geleana Drew Alston's (2016) *Methodological considerations for feminist qualitative inquiry and mentoring* challenged me to examine mentoring through a feminist lens. The mentor and mentee relationship is binary and, as such, should be equal. However, adult female students often lack access to a female mentor. As a mentor, educator, and advisor, I must remain cognizant of various critical perspectives (e.g., class hegemony theory, critical feminist perspectives, critical race theory) as I have in my research regarding the governance of nonprofit organizations. Second, Xenia Coulter and Alan Mandell (2016) discussed the very foundational premises as to why we separate adult from traditional students. As adult educators, and as members of AHEA, it has been our role to serve as the champion of the adult learner. We argue adults learn differently (andragogy versus pedagogy) and, as such, should be separated from their traditional counterparts. However, Coulter and Mandell asked, is this separation a hidden form of segregation and, if so, why would we support such a position? If such separation is warranted, the adult learning community must decide if a binary system is sufficient or if we must further adapt instructional modalities to the adult stages of life.

AHEA 2016 examined mentoring in a variety of contexts yet, at the end of the day, each presenter provided a vision of successful retention, persistence, and completion. My attendance motivated my desire to play a larger role in AHEA as an organization, in hopes of supporting its continued growth and success. As an alliance, it is our individual and institutional desires that will drive the future success of our students.

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